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UNITED STATES
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
US Department of State
2201 C Street NW Washington, DC 20230

November 15, 2022

Dear Secretary Blinken,

We write to express our grave concern with the current situations of tens of thousands of SIV-eligible Afghans who worked with the United States and remain at risk of retaliation and death at the hands of the Taliban. We strongly urge the Department of State to expedite its efforts to bring them to safety.

In 2006, the Congress first passed legislation creating a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program for Iraqis and Afghans who supported the U.S. combat missions there as interpreters. These heroes bore the burdens of combat alongside Americans, kept them safe, and helped them fight successfully. Offering them a safe path to resettlement in this country is the least we can do.

Today, the State Department estimates that 160,000 SIV-eligible Afghans remain at risk under Taliban rule in Afghanistan – on the run, targeted and murdered by vengeful Taliban fighters, and starving amid the growing humanitarian crisis. Only the United States government possesses the ability to evacuate them to safety. The administration has two powerful tools at its disposal to do so, and we urge you to use them now.

First, we ask that you increase alternative processing locations in the United States and abroad. We understand the lone Afghan processing facility at Camp As Salyilah, Qatar, has a limited intake capacity of 300 evacuees per week, which will drop to zero for the months of November and December due to the World Cup. At this rate, it could take the U.S. government almost nine years to evacuate those awaiting escape from the Taliban.

We request an update from the administration outlining measures the Department of State has taken to create additional evacuation opportunities for SIV recipients. Specifically:

1. What alternative avenues of evacuation has the Department of State already pursued with regional partners such as Pakistan, Uzbekistan, or Tajikistan?
2. What regional U.S. military bases have been assessed as viable options for increased SIV processing? If not U.S. facilities, what third country facilities have been considered?

3. How many SIV applicants is the Department of State tracking in Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan?
4. By what means will the Department of State evacuate them?
5. Has the Department of State helped secure entry visas or gate passes for Afghan SIV applicants attempting to enter those countries?
6. For the months of November and December 2022, and January 2023, will State pause all evacuation flights from Afghanistan, or will there be a temporary alternative to Camp As-Sayliyah during the World Cup?
7. What other means of evacuation have been explored to increase the rate of evacuations?

Second, the United States should offer parole status to those SIV applicants who have reached the Chief of Mission (COM) approval stage, regardless of their location, as it already has for the tens of thousands of other Afghan visa applicants fortunate enough to reach the United States in 2021. The SIV process takes time that our eligible Afghan allies do not have. The Department of State considers COM-approval to be the required standard of vetting for eligibility to travel from Afghanistan. Despite the fact that 95% of COM-approval recipients eventually finish their visa successfully, under current policy, they are required to wait to transit to the United States through the remaining nine steps of the SIV process (averaging 328 days) before being allowed entry into the United States.

Although Afghans can currently be granted individual parole at U.S. ports of entry, they generally cannot reach U.S. ports except on official Department of State charters, which are constrained by the Taliban. By providing legal authorization to travel to the U.S. from their current locations, categorical parole would enable larger numbers of eligible Afghans to travel by any means available, including private transportation. A resulting increase in evacuations would further the success of the United States' evacuation efforts, demonstrate commitment to allies and partners, and enhance U.S. efforts to build partnerships globally.

Under 8 U.S.C. §1182(d)(5) of the Immigration and Naturalization Act, Congress delegated discretionary parole authority to the executive. We implore you to use that authority to grant categorical parole to those who have received COM approval and enable our allies to finish their visa process in safety. We also request an explanation of any roadblocks that exist to granting categorical parole to COM-approved SIVs, and an explanation of what, if any, additional vetting would be required in order to grant categorical parole to COM-approved SIVs.

We also wish to highlight a common cause of coordination issues with the evacuation of Afghan SIVs, which is the lack of interagency authority to compel DOD, DHS, DOS, and ORR to work together to fix bottlenecks in the process. While we understand the State Department has taken the lead on the effort, we also understand it lacks the authority to task other agencies, which is why, for example, there are no alternatives to the sole lifeline in Qatar, which will operate at extremely limited capacity with the upcoming World Cup. To understand the interagency dynamics in the evacuation effort, we request answers to the following questions:

1. What has the NSC done to coordinate the interagency effort to evacuate SIV-eligible Afghans?
2. What authorities have been delegated to the CARE team at the State Department to coordinate the interagency effort to evacuate SIV-eligible Afghans?
3. Who has the responsibility to task the DOD to engage with CARE efforts to relocate SIV-eligible Afghans?

In order to achieve a successful continued evacuation, we believe that an NSC-level authority is required to manage the interagency process on Afghanistan relocation, and urge the administration to create such a role.

American credibility is on the line. Wherever America goes, we work by, with, and through partners on the ground in our diplomacy and security engagements. Future potential allies and partners must trust our promise to keep them safe when we leave, and we must demonstrate ourselves worthy of that trust.

Sincerely,



Seth Moulton
Member of Congress



Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress



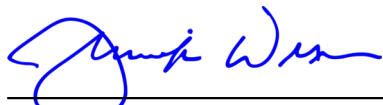
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